

Nigeria's killing fields flourish as police make futile efforts to battle cultism

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•Suspected cultists

The alarming rise in the activities of cultists across the country, despite efforts by law enforcement agencies to curb them, gives cause for concern, CHUKWUDI AKASIKE reports

MANY years ago, the activities of cultists were shrouded in absolute secrecy. They always held their meetings in the bush at night and away from prying eyes, made bonfires and danced to whatever strange music that fueled their misplaced excitement.

Even in those days, most cultists were students of tertiary institutions, who, after such nocturnal meetings, would sometimes storm their various campuses in the heat of the moment and wreak havoc on their fellow students.

These cultists often form confraternities, such as Aiye, Eiye, Black Axe, Black Beret Vikings, De Bam, De Well, Black Bra and Viqueens, among many others. The Black Bra, Jezebel and the Viqueens are strictly for women.

The members of these confraternities are literally the bad boys and girls on campus, whose main objectives are usually to recruit new members into their various groups and to engage in endless fights for supremacy with rival cults.

Imo, Bayelsa, Rivers, Lagos, Ogun, Akwa Ibom and some other states in the country have had their fair share of violence orchestrated by secret cults, in which many lives were lost in the most vicious, brazen and gruesome manner.

Not too long ago, a student of Engineering at the Rivers State University was killed by suspected cultists along Ada George Road in Port Harcourt, the state capital.

The corpse of the student, who was said to be on his way to school when the incident occurred, was found at the scene of the murder. It was riddled with machete cuts.

The student, whose identity was not immediately disclosed, was murdered less than 48 hours after a final-year student of the same institution, Prince Barisua, was shot by unknown gunmen near a hostel around the university.

Before the incident, which occurred in July 2019, a group of cultists had beheaded a man and ordered his wife to carry the severed head in a bowl into their waiting car.

Also, in Imo State, two daredevil cultists, popularly known as Blackface and Sparrow, were shot by the police during a gun battle in a forest around Assa community in the Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Area.

The police later disclosed that the slain cultists were members of the notorious Iceland confraternity and they were allegedly responsible for several criminal activities in Assa and Obile communities.

One locally-made shot gun with five live cartridges and one single-barrelled gun were recovered from the deceased, who was said to have also murdered an inspector and a corporal attached to the Ohaji Police Division. The police said their atrocities included the beheading of a resident of Assa community in September 2017.

Similarly, six persons were killed in Kogi State by some soldiers, following an alleged cult clash at Anyigba in Dekina LGA of the state. It was gathered that the cultists were gunned down at different spots in the community.

In Akwa Ibom State, cult groups have wreaked havoc in places like Etim Ekpo and Ukanafun Local Government Areas.

There have been similar cases in Ogun State. In a particular incident, one Yekini Wahab was reportedly shot by some 'bad boys' during an attack on the residents of Odokekere and Ogijo communities in the Sagamu Local Government Area of Ogun State. The cultists had also invaded the Oniburuku area of Odokekere, where they killed a herbalist, identified as Ifa. The cultists, according to a source, had fired into the air to create confusion before killing their targets and robbing the residents of the community.

In Lagos State, four persons were feared killed in a battle for supremacy between members of the Ejiye and Aiye confraternities in the Oworonshoki area of Lagos. It was gathered that the streets affected by the clash, which started around 5.58am, were Olopomeji, Ifako, L and K, and Salami. The suspected cultists reportedly used machetes and other weapons on each other, killing four persons in the process. It was gathered that a suspect was arrested by a team of policemen from the Oworonshoki Police Station over the incident.

With the Boko Haram insurgency still unresolved, there is no doubt that the upsurge in cult activities has compounded the nation's security woes.

Speaking on cultism-related violence in Nigeria, a university lecturer, Prof Steve Okodudu, said that although secret cults had always existed the society, their undesirable activities had reached an alarming proportion.

Okodudu attributed the rise in deadly cult activities to the unemployment situation in the country.

“When there is an economic downturn, people begin to take to different means of survival. This has been compounded by the nature of our politics, where politicians recruit all manner people for their election campaign. After the election, the hired hands are left to their own devices.

On the solution to the problem, he added, “I think we must try hard to get the economy working again. The basic infrastructure must be put in place and the economy must have the capacity to provide jobs for people. Again, our government must take its primary responsibility of providing security seriously. The investment made so far in security is neither here nor there. What makes the difference between underdeveloped countries and the developed ones is that there is security in the developed ones.”

Speaking on the origin of cultism in the country, he said, “Cult groups have always been part of our society. They started as part of the political control mechanism in our traditional societies and that eventually spread into the campuses. In fact, what you now call cult groups actually started as students’ associations and in no time, our universities started suffering from such setbacks that you find in the societies by virtue of the political economy of this country. Don’t forget that most of the people there have no jobs. So, they think the only way they can survive is to live by force of arms.”

A sociologist, Prof Mark Anikpo, described cultism in Nigeria as any other crime like armed robbery. He urged the federal and state governments to beef up security at known flashpoints in order to identify and arrest suspects.

Anikpo said that with good intelligence and a stiff penalty for offenders, cult activities, including mindless attack on innocent persons, would be reduced.

“You know that cultism is just like other crimes. Cultists are thieves and people who want to acquire things through illegal means. The penalty for cultism should be severe. But the society has to be restructured in such a manner that everybody should be able to fend for himself properly,” he added.

Also, university lecturer and public affairs analyst, Prof Tunde Fatunde, lamented that ordinary social clubs had degenerated into criminal organisations involved in mass murder, pipeline vandalism, money laundering, kidnapping and other vicious crimes.

He said, “Cultism in Nigeria has become a criminal organisation that is involved in kidnapping, money laundering, pipeline breaking and other vicious crimes. What we know as cultism today is a social phenomenon, especially in the university, that has gone from just being a social club to a mafia with vested political interests.

“Cultism has become a very rich enterprise because the cult members are living with the people of the business world and political organisations. They (cult members) pose a serious danger to university education and its social fabrics.”

Fatunde explained that only a decisive government policy against cultism would be able to eliminate the menace in the society, adding that students and university employees should be on the watch-lists of the federal and state governments and any person found guilty by the judiciary should go to jail, no matter his position in the society. He also suggested that vocational training should be added to the curricula of tertiary institutions in the country in order to keep the students busy.

But the Director, International Institute of Journalism, Port Harcourt Campus, Ibituru Pepple, observed that cultism had become a norm in the Nigerian society and it would be difficult to eliminate.

Pepple said that since most cultists always had the backing of some politicians, Nigerians would continue to live with the consequences of their actions.

“The society is beginning to accept cultism as a norm. If this is how it is going to remain, then we are finished in this country. There is a need for government to muster the courage to eliminate cultism,” he said.

However, it appears that the more security agencies make attempts to fight this monster to a standstill, the harder the criminals come.

The Rivers State Police Public Relations Officer, Mr. Nnamdi Omoni, in an interview with our correspondent, said the police had killed several cultists during gun duels, adding that some of the hardened cultists were traced to Kaduna and other neighbouring states.

He recalled how one cult kingpin, simply known as Devil, was gunned down in Bayelsa State by policemen attached to the state Police Command. Devil, who was shot dead after another cultist nicknamed Satan met a similar fate, was said to be responsible for most of the kidnapping and armed robbery incidents that occurred at the Ogoni end of the East-West Road.

“We have dealt cultists in this state a deadly blow. While some of them who engaged the police in gun battles were killed, others were arrested and prosecuted. Recently, we arrested some cult members and they are helping us to apprehend others. Remember that the police have destroyed cult camps in Ogoni and some other parts of the state,” Omoni said.